Laurel Valley Sugar Planation
2 miles south of Thibodaux on State Route 308
Thibodaux
Lafourche Parish
Louisiana

HAER No. LA-1

PHOTOGRAPHS
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HAER - LAUREL VALLEY PROJECT
SUMMER 1978

NAME:	LAUREL VALLEY SUGAR PLANTATION
LOCATION:	THIBODAUX, LOUISIANA
DATE OF SETTLEMENT:	1831
PRESENT OWNER:	LAUREL VALLEY PLANTATION, INC.
PRESENT USE:	SUGAR PLANTATION
SIGNIFICANCE:	LARGEST NINETEENTH CENTURY SUGAR PLANTATION STILL INTACT IN THE UNITED STATES.
ABSTRACT:	THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE HISTORY OF LAUREL VALLEY BETWEEN 1831 AND 1926, SPECIFICALLY SUCH FACTORS AS THE PLANTATION OWNERS AND LABORERS.
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Etienne de Bore has been called "the Savior of Louisiana." In 1794, after insects had destroyed his indigo crop, and falling prices his profits, he decided to risk what funds remained on the manufacture of sugar. He planted seed cane, directed forty slaves in the construction of a mill, irrigated his fields when dry, and hired and experienced sugar maker. He spent $4,000 that year, but in the fall De Bore's cane syrup granulated, enabling him to make a $5,000 profit from sales. The risks of this venture were great, for other attempts had failed. Louisiana planters had been trying to manufacture sugar since 1751, when a group of Jesuits from Santo Domingo had brought a package of seed cane into the French colony at New Orleans. But each time killing frosts or the mistakes of inexperienced laborers frustrated their efforts. In the aftermath of De Bore's experiments, however, many Louisiana planters began to cultivate sugar cane.(1)

In fact, by 1849, the state could count 1,536 mills that manufactured over 130,000 tons of sugar.(2)

Laurel Valley was one of many plantations established as the sugar cane culture expanded in Louisiana. Situated on the eastern bank of Bayou Lafourche, about two miles south of Thibodaux, in Lafourche Parish, the plantation came under the cultivation of sugar cane around 1832. Up to this time the lands nearest the bayou had been used as a family farm by petits habitants from Nova Scotia. But with the introduction of sugar cane, Laurel Valley's owners began to buy additional acreage and erect buildings to support the manufacture of sugar. Today there are more than seventy-two structures on the plantation, establishing it as the largest, ninteenth century sugar cane plantation intact in the United States. This paper examines the history of Laurel Valley between 1831 and 1926, especially the plantation owners and the laborers. The hope is a better understanding of the operation of the Louisiana sugar cane industry can be ohtained.

LAND AND LEVEES

Of all the southern states possibly nothing sets Louisiana apart more from its neighbors than its land. For over 15,000 years, the state has had the Mississippi River as its chief architect.(3) The river has shifted its course, swinging first to one side of the state, then to the other, and then back down through the center. There have heen seven major shifts within the state. But each shift has had beneficial result, altering the landscape and leaving behind tons of alluvial soil carried down from the central part of the United States. Moreover, shifts also left behind small distributary streams or bayous which often repeated the Mississippi River pattern. Thus, a deltaic plain developed from the head of the Atchafalaya River to the Pearl River Delta in the east and to the mouth of the Vermillion River on the west. It represents about 13,000 square miles or nearly thirty

percent of Louisana's land.(4) The alluvial deposits, wholly within Louisiana, extend to a depth of more than fifteen feet. So much alluvial soil has been deposited in only a few parts of the world.(5)

Laurel Valley lies within the Mississippi Deltaic Plain. Its lands are made up alluvial deposits dropped more than a thousand years ago when Bayou Lafourche served as the main channel of the Mississippi. But when the Mississippi shifted to its present course, it left a natural levee system that sets off the Lafourche region from other areas within the deltaic plain. Besides being the most recent, the Lafourche natural levees are the highest and widest sloping back from the water's edge nearly three miles. Centuries of flooding produced the levees. Silt and sand settled out-beyond the banks, gradually building up the area. Coarse heavy materials dropped first, forming the best drained and richest land. Finer sediments settled out farther back from the Bayou, near the swampy lowland, creating a heavy, clay-like soil that drains poorly.(6)

The sloping lands attracted early settlers, especially those wanting to cultivate sugar cane. They found that the natural levees, having a solid composition, proved so prodiguously fertile that many believed their fertility inexhaustible.(7)

But the natural levees posed one problem. They provided riparian landowners insufficient protection during high water. The lower Mississippi Valley filled up quickly after unusually heavy rains in the midwest or when winter snows melted rapidly. The natural levees could contain moderate amounts of water, but unusually large amounts sometimes came over the banks or, even worse, broke through, causing a crevasse. When this happened, according to an early traveler, the water rushed "from the river with indescribable impetuosity, with a noise like the roaring of a cataract, boiling and foaming, and rearing everything...." (8) Then, up and down the waterway, residents rushed to halt the destruction. They stopped an overflow by piling more dirt on top the banks; if crevasse had occurred, they drove double rows of pilings on each side of the break to form a circle. Then they wove twigs and branches into the pilings, later filling and sealing the breaks with larger branches, trees and dirt.(9)

In the beginning the construction of protective levees for the fertile alluvial soils was haphazard. In 1743, French officials required each land owner to maintain his own levees; the Spanish later continued this policy.(10) More often than not, the economic standing of the riparian land owner determined construction size and techniques. As a consequence, no uniform standards existed as to levee height, width, or material. Throughout Louisiana levees varied from 40 to 120 feet back from the natural bank, 4 to 6 feet high, 6 to 9 feet wide at the base.(11) Sometimes levees were shored up by driving cypress planks down through the crown of the levee. Sometimes landowners used interior drainage ditches to remove water that caused soft areas in the levees. In other instances trees or Bermuda grass were planted to protect the soil from surface abrasion and erosion.(12)

This individualistic policy of the colonial period gradually gave way to a more centralized control after Louisiana became a state. In 1816, in the first of many statutes, the legislature enacted a comprehensive levee and road law granting parish governing boards--police juries--complete control of levees on their parish.(13) In Lafourche Parish, for example, the jury required riparian landowners to maintain what was called the Creole Levee: "The crown was to be at least 4 feet wide, the slope of base not less than 2 to 1 for a perpendicular depth of 3 feet and thence to the ground, for each foot in depth, and increase of base on each side equal to the distance of the upper face from the crown."(14) The police jury dispatched inspectors periodically to determine if any sections of the levee were in disrepair. Inspectors could order work done to repair weak spots, and the police jury could then sue the landowner "for whose account the said work or repairs were made." (15) In 1879, the legislature passed enabling legislation for uniform construction practices along inter-parish waterways. It empowered parishes to establish levee districts beyond their political boundaries and to pass the improvement costs on to all who benefited. (16) Further changes in policy in the twentieth century increased the role of the federal government. In 1917, the Federal Flood Control Act gave the United States Army Corps of Engineers many responsibilities formerly held by the levee districts; in recent years, the authority of the Corps has been expanded.(17)

LAUREL VALLEY: THE OWNERS

Settlement of the Bayou Lafourche region came late in the eighteenth century under Spanish direction. In 1763 Spain took control of the Louisiana colony from the French; soon thereafter, Spain tried to establish control over the sparsely populated province. It looked with favor on French Acadians recently expelled from Nova Scotia by the English and having a reputation as "hard working, experinced, industrious farmers."(18) Spanish authorities allowed the Acadians to settle first on the lands above New Orleans. In the 1770's Acadians began to move down into Lafourche Parish, establishing farms side by side, along the bayou; the farms averaged five arpents (one arpent equals 192 feet) front and 40 arpents deep.(19)

The first permanent settler on the lands that would be called Laurel Valley was Etienne Boudreaux, and Acadian, who received a land grant from Spanish authorities in the early 1770's. Like many of the other grants, Boudreaux's included five arpents of land fronting Bayou Lafourche to a depth of forty arpents.(20) Little is known about the activities of the family, but the 1810 census lists thirteen persons at the Boudreaux residence, nine males and four females. They had a loom, no doubt an indication that the family grew cotton so Mr. Boudreaux and her daughters could weave blue cottonade for the family.(21) By 1819, the year of Boudreaux's death, he had additional tracts of land and frontage of fifteen arpents.(22)

More than likely, the Boudreauxs followed the lifestyle of other Acadians who resettled in Louisiana. Once on their lands, they unpacked their cultural baggage and tried to reconstruct the familiar sights, smells and sounds they had known in Canada. They built simple cabins and cleared and tilled the soil with the help of their families. Generally, there were no large landholders, each family having only what it needed to survive. They relied on such standby crops as corn and rice and learned new ones like cotton and possibly okra, an African vegetable. Cattle and other domesticated animals were left to roam unattended at the swamp's edge. And for those needs beyond their farm, these petits habitants cut and marketed swamp cypress and Spanish moss. Some Acadians turned away from subsistence agriculture and engaged instead in hunting trapping, fishing or lumbering.(23) But, for the most part, they were small farmers who raised what they needed to maintain their families.

The Acadians might have succeeded in re-creating their former Canadian lifestyle in Lafourche Parish had not Etienne de Bore crystallized sugar. Since the 1820's, South Louisiana had been besieged by cotton planters and small farmers from the lower South looking to get ahead. The boom and bust cycles of cotton had caused many newcomers to turn to sugar as an alternative. With its fertile natural levees and a waterway linking the Mississippi River with the Gulf of Mexico, Bayou Lafourche became a center of resettlement activities. In 1827, no less than $50,000 worth of its woodlands were purchased by planters from the Natchez, Mississippi, area. (24) One New Orleans newspaper noted that each week, saw the arrival on the bayou of prospective purchasers "to examine the country with the view of purchasing and settling therein."(25) For the petits habitants the offers were indeed tempting. Many sold their lands. Thus, an area once densely settled by French-speaking white yeoman farmers, was soon transformed into plantations occupied by a few wealthy Americans with many black slaves.(26)

Like their neighbors along the Bayou, the Boudreauxs sold their land. On December 12, 1834, the family accepted $35 for fifteen front arpents from Joseph William Tucker, a young Mississippi planter.(27) Why the Boudreauxs sold their land so cheaply is not known. It may have been a combination of factors. After Etienne Boudreaux's death in 1819, the land was probably vacated by his sons, who married and established their own farms elsewhere in the Parish. Perhaps one or two of his sons could have purchased the lands for themselves and planted cane on the 500 acres. Already, in 1828, Lafourche had 34 mills producing more than 100 hogsheads of sugar weighing 1,100 pounds each.(28) But to profitably grow cane required an outlay of capital which the petits habitants did not have and, according to one authority, refused to borrow, not wanting to go into debt.(29) What undoubtedly made land-holding a burden was the high of maintaining fifteen front arpents of levee along the bayou, an expense presumably beyond their means.

Joseph Tucker established Laurel Valley Plantation. He cleared the land, expanded the acreage, constructed a mill and introduced sugar cane to its fields. He arrived in Lafourche Parish from Natchez near the end of 1831 and quickly settled on about 815 acres that he owned in partnership with Thomas Barnard, also a Natchez planter. Their land was described as being about three miles south of Thibodaux bounded by front lands owned by Etienne Boudreaux.(30) Tucker bought Barnard out in 1832 and, over the next fifteen years, acquired nearly 5,000 additional arpents.(31) These purchases included the fifteen front arpents from the Etienne Boudreaux estate for $35 and several sections from the federal government for about $1.25 an acre.(32) Most of the latter swamp land at the back of the plantation and valuable for its cypress stands and cordage. Tucker raised the money for these purchases in a number of ways. In 1835 his wife, Marcelline Emma Gaude, received $3,250 from the settlement of her father's estate.(33) And, in 1838, he sold a half-interest in the plantation to Barnard's wife for $12,000.(34) But most of the money came from mortgages drawn of New Orleans banks and commercial houses. Tucker mortgaged his half interest in the plantation for $10,000 to the Union Bank of Louisiana for one year at 10 percent.(35) Almost three years later, in 1844 he again mortgaged his one-half interest for $15,000 to the commercial firm of Bogart and Foley.(36) Little, if any money, was involved in these transactions, for Tucker sought credit.

The expansion of Tucker's landholdings suggests that he was an able, enterprising planter. In the years before his death in 1852, Tucker established Laurel Valley as a parish leader in the manufacturing of sugar cane. There were about 76 mills in Lafourche Parish during the years for which his production records exist, 1849-1851, and Laurel Valley led all other parish mills in the total number of hogsheads of sugar.(37) Furthermore, the legacy of his managerial abilities kept the plantation in the top four, six out of the eight years before the outbreak of the Civil War.(38)

Although specific details about the operations of Laurel Valley under Tucker are unavailable, it appears that out of the nearly 5,000 acres of land he owned, there were never more than 1,000 in cultivation. When he applied for a loan in 1844, he listed 600 acres in sugar cane.(39) Considering the fact that a large number of mules, oxen and horses were needed to cultivate this much acreage, he had to have an almost equal number of acres in corn and forage crops. Moreover, he no doubt used a variety called Ribbon Cane. Introduced into the state by a Georgia planter, John J. Coiron, in 1817, Ribbon Cane got its name because red, green and yellow stripes extend from joint to joint. But more significantly, this variety helped to trigger the expansion of the sugar cane cultivation because it had an earlier maturation date than other varieties and a thicker stalk which provided some protection against early frosts.(40) In spite of many late nineteenth century attempts to find a substitute, Ribbon Cane

was such a good variety that Louisiana planters continued to rely on it until the 1920's.

About the only information that provides an insight into the antebellum abilities of Laurel Valley to earn a profit came in the year immediately after Tucker's death, from July 1852 to August 1853. George Washington Tucker, Joseph's brother, served as administrator for the estate and produced 685 hogsheads of sugar and 1,458 barrels of molasses which he sold for $42,006.46. The plantation's expenses for the year totaled $11,129.53, leaving a net profit of $30,876.93. Expenses varied by included such items as $312.24 in freight charges to steamboats, $800 to the sugar maker, $750 to an overseer for nine months, $39 to slaves for extra work, $75 in taxes on the sale of sugar and molasses, and $1,042.06 for meat, salted pork and bacon to feed the plantation's slaves. The largest recorded expense was paid to George Tucker himself, $2,616.60 for ten slaves that he hired out to work on the plantation.(41)

Throughout his lifetime, Joseph Tucker relied on slave labor. Upon his arrival in the Lafourche interior in November 1831 he had twenty-two slaves, ranging in age from fifteen months to thirty years.(42) Over the next twenty years their numbers increased significantly. In 1841, 61 on the plantation, and in 1852 the number was 130.(43) This increase come through slave purchases as well as the birth of children. Each year Tucker usually added a slave or two, but in 1844, about the time he erected the mill, he purchased twenty-three slaves from brokers in New Orleans.(44) The number of slave children is almost impossible to document, but in 1850, the Slave Census recorded thirty-nine youths under the age of ten on the plantation.(45) Interestingly, creditors never had to seize Laurel Valley slaves to collect payment of their loans. About the only time there was any significant reduction in the slave population before emancipation came in 1863, when about twenty-five took off for nearby lines.(46)

Tucker was no southern aristocrat. Nevertheless, he did provide his family with comfortable quarters. They lived in a fifteen-room house with four fireplaces, brick kitchen and a wash house addition.(47) A more specific idea of their lifestyle is provided by an 1852 inventory of the estate. It was a room-by-room accounting of the personal property and reveals that the family owned the following:

Parlor

1. Twelve haire bottom Mahogany chairs.
2. Six sophas.
3. Two Mahogany rocking chairs.
4. Two Mahogany arme chairs with haire bottoms.

5. 1 Mahogany book case with books of divers work.

6. A clock, 2 candle sticks, 2 flower pots.

Room Adjoining Parlor

1. A bedstead and bedding.

2. A toillette.

3. A writing desk.

4. A washstand.

5. A round table.

Dining Room

1. Eight chairs with couchins.

2. Twelve chairs.

3. A hatstand in Mettle.

4. A dining table.

5. A mahogany side board.

6. A small table.

7. Three maps.

Room Adjoining Dining Room

1. A piano and piano stand, a rocking chair, 2 sociables.

Fifth Room

1. A bedstead and bedding, wash stand and toillette.

Sixth Room

1. A book case, a bed, a clock, a wash stand.

Seventh Room

1. Side board (Mahogany) 1 sopha, 3 rocking chairs.

Eighth Room

1. One bedstead in Mahogany, one armoire in Mahogany, one toillette.

Nineth and Tenth Room

1. One bedstead and bedding, one toillette, one side board, one truck.

2. A bed and bedding, one jar and beathing tub.

Eleventh Room

1. One bed and bedding, one sopha.

Twelfth Room

1. A bed and bedding, an armoire (Black walnut), a toillette, two wash stands, and a small table.

Thirteenth Room

1. Two beds and bedding.

Fourteenth Room

1. Two bedstands.

Fifteenth Room

1. Two bedsteads and bedding.

Miscellaneous

1. Furniture of four fire places.

2. A lot of crockery ware.(48)

For recreation the family enjoyed horse racing, the favorite pastime of many antebellum planters. It owned and stabled at Laurel Valley ten race horses, 18 mares and a stud named Watter Brown.(49) Some of Louisiana's leading breeder and turn enthusiasts lived near the Lafourche area. On Bayou Teche, Alexander Porter kept his stables at Oaklawn and on the

Mississippi River William Minor stabled his horses at Waterloo and Duncan Kenner stabled at Ashland. There were a number of tracks in the area. Planters set aside land for tracks in their pasture and held several match races each year. The more elaborate courses were at Natchez, Baton Rouge and New Orleans. In the beginning of the 1840's, it was not uncommon to have as many as 10,000 spectators attending the fall and spring New Orleans race. (50)

After the death of Joseph Tucker, Laurel Valley's operations came under the management of a cousin, Caleb, who married Joseph's widow in 1855.(51) More than likely Caleb continued his cousin's agricultural policies, for the plantation remained a leading sugar producer in the parish.(52) The Civil War, however, seriously disrupted Laurel Valley's activities. In 1862, union troops placed it under strict military supervision after they captured New Orleans. General Benjamin Butler issued an order subjecting the property of Louisianians who hereafter bore arms against the United States government to confiscation.(53) Laurel Valley lost its loyalty status around 1863 after Caleb joined Confederate troops at Vicksburg. The results were to be expected. According to an estimate, in 1865, Federal authorities seized between 1,000 and 1,500 hogsheads of sugar and 1,200 and 1,400 barrels of molasses.(54) And, on April 15, 1863, when Emile LeBlanc, Parish Recorder, inventoried the plantation, he worte: "No horses, mules, cattles, or other animals to be found. Implements of husbandry are not generally in good order and are so scattered about in such a manner as not to be found in lots for appraisal. No household furniture to be found in any buildings on the premises."(55)

It would take almost twenty years for Laurel Valley to recover from The Civil War. Caleb was killed at Vicksburg and in the aftermath several individuals leased the plantation including the oldest son, Joseph Pennington Tucker. He took over in 1869, but was never able to attain pre-war levels of productivity, as the following chart indicates:

1867	40	hogsheads	of	sugar	78	barrels	of molasses
1868	86	"	"	"	75	"	" "
1869	269	"	"	"	488½	"	" "
1870	290	"	"	"	610	"	" "

His lack of managerial skills were not to blame for this situation. There were a number of factors that combined to hamper the operation of the plantation. When he took over the plantation was virtually without horses, mules, and equipment. Then, there were crevasses on Bayou Lafourche and the Mississippi River in 1867, and flood waters destroyed the entire crop. According the excutor, Louis Bush, the levee breaks caused "heavy additional expenses on the plantation such as the erection of protection levees, draining machines and extra labor."(57)

Finnally, Tucker faced a situation almost unknown to his father: He had to deal with contract labor. The Freedman's Bureau directly supervised all plantation labor, and planters had to sign work contracts with all employees. Included in the contracts were the terms of employment, rate of pay, and requirements for housing and provisions.(58) Tucker's feelings about the situation surfaced in 1871 when he contracted with twenty-three Chinese for one year's work and an option for a additional two years.(59)

The inability of Laurel Valley to regain its productivity forced Tucker to rely more and more on credit to maintain the plantation. The proceeds from the sale of sugar and molasses were not enough to offset the expenses. In 1869, the plantation earned $53,720.53, in 1870, $39,168 and 1871, $62,308.65. Yet, at the same time, the indebtedness increased. At the beginning of his lease the plantation had outstanding debts of $42,000, but these rose to $59,905 in 1868, $92,824 in 1869, $108,053 in 1870 and $116,260 in 1871. With no end in sight, the executor, Louis Bush, appeared before the Parish Court in Thibodaux, on January 12, 1872, on hehalf of the family and asked that the plantation be sold at public auction to satisfy its creditors.(60)

Laurel Valley was sold on March 7, 1872, to a Thibodaux resident, Clay Knobloch. But on the same day that Knobloch passed his sale he sold the plantation to William P. Tucker, of Terrebonne Parish, another son of Joseph Tucker.(61) William managed the plantation for the next twenty-one months and through two grinding seasons. He gave up and sold to Samuel W. Hammond of New Orleans on Decemaber 12, 1873.(62) Hammond held Laurel Valley for only seven months and sold his interest on July 10, 1874, to Burch A. Wormald, a Thibodaux resident.(63)

Little is know of Wormald's plantation operations. Existing evidence suggests that he was ready to adopt new techniques to improve Laurel Valley's sugar production. In about 1876, he switched the mill's processing equipment from a steam train with open pans to vacuum pans and centrifugals.(64) The new methods increased the efficiency of the mill in extracting sugar from cane syrup, and production totals gradually returned to pre-Civil War levels. Wormald tried briefly to diversify the plantation's economic hase. In the 1880's he flooded the back fields and planted rice for several seasons. The harvest was never large and by 1890 he gave up cultivation.(65) He also constructed a portion of the main house and, more than likely, erected the twenty-six douhle Creole quarters for the workers.(66) But all of these activities cost money, in fact too much money for Wormald. To raise funds, he mortgaged the plantation to the New Orleans commerical firm of Behan and Zuberbier. In 1892, unable to pay about $70,000 in debts, he was forced to turn Laurel Valley over to his creditors.(67)

In 1893, the partnership of Frank Barker and J. Wilson Lepine purchased Laurel Valley.(68) With a nationwide depression at hand and falling agricultural prices, their timing might have been unfortunate. But both Barker and Lepine had been planting for some time. They came from families with a sugar-farming background and, for the previous ten years, they had operted Melodia Plantation, about four miles below Laurel Valley and one-sixth its size.(69) They represented a new plantation-owner type coming into prominence at the end of the nineteenth century. Gone was the so-called romance of the "royal" days of antebellum plantation life. In this age of commercialization these men were agricultural capitalists who epitomized the traits of Yankee enterprise, engery and an eye toward profit.

Both Barker and Lepine possessed particular traits complimentary to the other, laying the foundation for a successful management of their interests. Lepine preferred to direct the day-to-day operations of the plantations. He enjoyed directing work crews and supervising the mill at sugar-grinding time. He spent most of his time on the plantation where he lived with his family after moving from Melodia about 1897. Baker on the other hand, preferred to direct the plantation finances from New Orleans where he lived and owned and operated a commerical warehouse. Laurel Vally purchased provisions and sold sugar and molasses through Barker, thus eliminating the usual commission payments.

Soon after taking over, Barker and Lepine changed Laurel Valley from a plantation with a mill for processing only its own cane into what the sugar historian J. Carlye Sitterson would term a central factory complex.(70) Not only was the cane from its own fields ground at the mill, but also that of neighbors and any tenants who rented land. This change of status was not unique, for other mill owners throughout Louisiana's sugar bowl had made similar changes, because of the high cost of labor and an inability to retain sufficient labor from season to season.(71) In addition to adequate, pay, worker sought respect from owners and decent living conditions. If workers found these conditions, they stayed; if not, they simply moved on to another plantation. In an attempt to overcome labor's uncertainty, planters with mills began to rely more and more on small farmers for cane; this was a way to avoid the high cost labor. They found it economical to direct their capital into sugar manufacturing.(72)

A more specific idea of their "neighbor-tenant" relationship can be obtained by examining the mills tonnage chart for the years 1899 to 1925. During this period the mill ground about 30,000 tons of cane every year. Of this amount, 11,300 tons came from Laurel Valley fields; the rest, 18,700 tons, was purchased from "neighbors and tenants."(73) In 1908, for example, the mill purchased 27,705 tons from 53 farmers, including 6,623 tons from Melodia.(74) Yet a number of farmers involved in these pur-

chases fluctuated considerably from year to year. Some gave up and moved off to other farms, or to town, or became wage labors if they got too far in debt. In spite of the purchases, Barker-Lepine made reasonable profits. Income and expense statements, available for 1901, to 1915 (excepting, 1913), reveal that the partnership netted an average profit of $40,000 a year. This includes a flood loss of nearly $57,000 in 1912; the highest net profit was $81,707 in 1908 and the lowest $8,481 in 1906.(75)

The decline and demise of Laurel Valley's factory mill complex began after World War I, because of declining cane production. From 1919 to 1925, the plantation averaged only 6,900 tons of cane a year, a fifty percent reduction from 1899 to 1918, when the average was 12,600 tons a year. Just as important for the success of the factory-mill complex, the "neighbors and tenants" also experienced similar declines. The amount of cane they sold to the mill averaged 15,557 tons a year, compared 18,984 tons before the war.(76)

Laurel Valley's problem was not unique, however. It was caught up in a general decline throughout the Louisiana sugar bowel which witnessed falling prices, lower yields per acre, and higher production costs, Many factories found the pressures too great and shut down their operations.(77) In 1910, for instance, raw sugar factories in the state numbered almost 200, but in 1926, only 54 remained.(78) If the finger of blame must be pointed at someone, it should be at the planters themselves. During the war planters milled their best cane, that normally reserved for planting, preferring higher profits for the sucrose-rich plant cane. But when the war ended, planters found themselves with plant cane infected with mosaic disease which destroys the ability of cane to resist other types of infections. Consequently, at harvest, the planters faced reduced tonnage and lower sucrose quantities per stalk(79)

Declining field production and higher operating costs untimately forced Laurel Valley to rely more and more on New Orleans banks for day-to-day credit. Indebtedness worsened until February, 1926, one month after the death of Lepine, when the Whitney Bank of New Orleans took over the management of plantation financial operations.(80) The mill stayed opened that year, closing its doors only after infected cane produced insufficient sucrose to permit crystallization. Unable to find a buyer, the bank arranged with Wilson Lepine, Jr. to manage the plantation's agricultural operations. It took him about seventeen years to pay off the debts. By 1945, Laurel Valley was free of mortages, but its cane was being transported to nearby factories for grinding.(81)

SUGAR: ITS CULTIVATION AND LABORERS

Sugar cane was probably first grown as a crop in China, later being introduced to India and Arabia by traders. Crusaders brought it to Europe. Once appetites developed, demand for sugar increased and the cultivation of the crop spread rapidly into these countries with a climate conducive to its growth. Columbus introduced sugar cane to the Western Hemisphere where Spanish Conquistadors found ideal natural conditions: Caribbean temperatures average more than 75 degrees throughout the year, considerable sunshine, and more than sixty inches of rainfall each year. Unfortunately, as early growers found, killing frosts cover Louisiana in December and January, halting the maturation of the cane and forcing growers to replant a third of their acreage every year. But, on the other hand, Louisiana has certain advantages that make up the uncooperative weather. (82) In an area encompassing roughly 640,000 acres of Mississippi Deltaic Plain, the Louisiana sugar bowl contains rich alluvial deposits of mixed clay and sand, which enable planters to produce higher yields of cane per acre than those anywhere in the world. (83)

Louisiana planters, accustomed to growing indigo or rice, encountered few problems in switching their labor to sugar. Their fields were already prepared. They had only to buy seed and direct their field hands in the planting of the new crop. But those with woodlands, like Joseph Tucker along Bayou Lafourche had to clear their fields of trees and underbrush. Drains and ditches had to be cut and laced together to carry off excess water. Drainage was especially important, for poor drainage could destroy cane.

Little information exists about Laurel Valley's antebellum drainage pattern. The only surviving fixture from the Tucker years is the foundation for a waterwheel that threw excess water over a rear levee into the swamp. Yet if Tucker was consistent with pre-Civil War practices, he cut parallel ditches, two hundred feet apart, from the front to the back and then cross ditches, about six hundred feet apart. More than likely he had from twenty to thirty miles of ditches for every square mile of land in cultivation. Oftentimes, bayous served as natural adjuncts to the artificial canals. (84) The only specific figures about Laurel Valley's drainage system is from a turn-of-the-century map showing forty-three and a half miles of canals and ditches around the plantation. These varied in width from two to twenty feet, and were crossed by 210 bridges, totaling seven miles in length. By this time, Barker and Lepine had added a Menge pump to speed up the removal of surplus water at the rear of the plantation. (85)

Insights into the practices and procedures of sugar cane cultivation can be found in several diaries that remain from the Barker-Lepine years. (86)

One of these, for 1903, has been included in this report. It was kept by the bookkeeper, Sigumund Guggenheimer, who worked on the plantation from 1899 to 1904 before taking similar position on a plantation in northeast Louisiana.(87) The reader of the diary will quickly note that antebellum methods of planting and harvesting sugar cane persist. Though machines do most of the work today, technological innovation when it came to Laurel Valley normally meant improvements for the mill or the drainage system. Due to the lack of information it will probably never be known just exactly what type of fields operations Tucker followed. But the fact that he was one of the leading sugar producers in the parish lends itself to comparison with other antebellum plantation owners. Their practices can help to establish an initial point of reference for understanding agricultural methods between 1832 and 1926.

Before the Civil War, plantation work was divided into four indentifiable parts: planting, which normally began in January when weather permitted and lasted until March; cultivation from April to July be hoe and plow (planters laid-by their cane only after the cane leaves touched and shaded the base of the stalk); general work, such as putting up hay, gathering corn, cutting cordwood and repairing the sugar mill; and grinding from October to January. Then the entire process would start over again, repeated year after year.(88)

Because of frost, cane must be replanted more often in Louisiana than in the Caribbean. Louisiana growers replant cane every three years. The tallest and most productive cane, the first year's growth, called plant cane, buds forth from the seed cane. The second year's growth, "rattoon," is shorter, more compact, yet produces generous amounts of sucrose and emerges from the roots of the previous plant cane. "Stubble," or the last crop, is shorter, reveals further deterioration, and comes from the rattoon cane. Instead of replanting the entire crop, planters divided their lands into three equal parts. Two parts produce the actual cane while a third lies fallow or planted in another crop, such as cowpeas, that replenishes the soil.(89)

Planting used to begin when heavy plows pulled by oxen or mules broke up the hallow ground and turned the soil into rows. In the early years when the ground was especially fertile the distance between the rows varied from three to five feet. In the 1840's planters found it easier to work both man and machine with a distance of seven to eight feet. The incorporation of the wider distance enabled fields hands to use double mule teams rather than singles to work the soil. Next, double plows, called flucks, would cut shallow trenches or drills at the top of the rows. Here planters would place between two and four canes at distances of about four inches. They lapped them and laid them straight, with crooked stalks cut to assure a straight line. Then the cane was

covered and left to grow. The whole object of cultivation at this point required keeping the land loose and keeping dirt against the stalk of the growing cane to keep it from falling over.(90)

Growers selected plant cane from the fields in October. It was the first cane cut at harvest; then it was stacked near the fields to be planted in the spring. The layer of the cane were so placed that the leaves of the plant covered the stalk of the lower level, affording some measure of protection from frosts. The only problem with matlaying cane came when the "mats" were opened up. Sometimes the plant cane had been severely affected by dry rot or damp rot.(91) Most of this was substantially overcome after the Civil War when planter began windrowing their plant cane -- that is, burying it in the rows until planted.(92)

For the "rattoon" or "stubble" crop, preparations for the next year involved what was called "barring off the stubble," running as close as possible to each side of the stubble with a specially-designed plow to throw off the dirt. The "rattoon of stubble" was then shaved or sharply cut about one inch from the ground with an instrument pulled by a mule.(93)

When the harvest season began in October, workers and animals raced to bring the cane in before the deadly frosts; once the cutting season began the workers -- slave or wage -- had almost no time to themselves. From Joseph Tucker through Barker-Lepine the techniques remained almost the same. The field work was performed by men, women and childred who were divided into groups according to ability. The first and the most important were the cutters who went to the field armed with thirteen-inch-long knives, four inches wide. They attacked the cane with these long blades, chopping off the leaves, then decapitating the top, and finally separating the stalk from its roots. They moved continuously through the rows of cane. Behind them came another group of younger men and sometimes women picking up the cleaned stalks and placing them in mule-drawn wagons for the trip to the mill.(94) Barker-Lepine speeded up this process by installing derricks adjacent to the railroad at central field points. Consequently, trains rather then mule carts, completed the last leg of the journey to the mill.(95)

Once the harvest was completed, workers at Laurel Valley and elsewhere found their daily routines somewhat relaxed. Unskilled workers went to the fields to clear brush and to clean ditches. Some went in the fields to gather and haul the corn to a crib for feeding the mules. More specialized crews, especially under Barker-Lepine, worked on the railroad, repairing the rolling stock, replacing worn-out tracks and clearing way debris. There were other such as the coopers who made barrels and carpenters who kept up the plantation buildings.(96)

From the beginning of Laurel Valley, the relationship between owners and workers ranged from slavery to contract, to free wage labor. Joseph Tucker used slaves to work his fields. He started with twenty-two that he brought with him from Natchez, but he died years later owning 130. Because he lived on the plantation, he or members of his family no doubt personally supervised the daily work and used drivers chosen from among the slaves to enforce orders. About the only non-slave labor under Tucker's supervision were the skilled workers in the sugar mill such as the sugar maker.(97) After the war his sons relied on many of these former slaves. Although freemen, they signed one-year work contracts which guaranteed them a daily wage as low as 35 cents and as high as $1.00.(98) The number of these workers fluctuated by as many as thirty or forty a month. Some workers demanded higher wages than those for which they had contracted; others simply moved off the plantation. The instability caused Tucker and others to recruit Chinese workers. In 1872 there were twenty-three under contract at Laurel Valley with options for two additional years.(99)

Burch Wormald became the first of the post-War owners at Laurel Valley to make a major effort to stabilize the plantation work force. He tore down the slave cabins, reminders of the previous era, and erected twenty-six double Creole frame structures. These new quarters offered workers greatly improved living conditions. Wormald was evidently successful because in the 1880's more than twenty families were listed as year-round residents on Laurel Valley.(100) Some were former slaves, others descendants of French Acadians who had been pushed back to the brules (high swamp ridges) in the 1820's by the growth of the sugar culture. Plantations like Laurel Valley offered these sons and grandsons of petits habitants the security of stable employment.

Under the partnership of Barker-Lepine, however, most labor problems were overcome. The partnership needed a dependable labor supply if its mill complex was to survive. Between 1897 and 1922, more than thirty-five residential structures were added, including twenty-six "shotgun" buildings for field workers and eight Creole "T" houses for skilled employees. (101) As a result, they attracted over sixty families as permanent residents. During harvests the plantation obtained seasonal laborers from Mississippi through jobbers who received $1.00 to $2.00 a day per worker provided.(102) These workers were housed in three boarding houses maintained by the plantation. The pay of unskilled workers remained fairly constant during the Barker-Lepine years. In the summer, workers received about 85 cents a day and during grinding about $1.25 a day. As could be expected, skilled workers received much more -- from $75.00 to $300.00. a month.(103) Over the years the work force remained fairly stable. But after 1926, cut backs in the operations and the depression caused many families to seek employment on other plantation or in nearby cities, especially New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Since that time, machines have taken over so many aspects of cultivation that today only six families live on Laurel Valley. The only time extra labor is needed is when the seed cane must be planted, a task still performed by hand.

FOOTNOTES

1. J. Carlyle Sitterson, Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South. 1753-1950 (Lexington, 1953), 3-4.

2. Ibid., 30.

3. Roger Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers During Slavery and After, 1840-1875 (Baton Rouge, 1939), 4, and Fred B. Kniffen, Louisiana Its Land and People (Baton Rouge, 1968) 54.

4. Robert W. Harrison, Alluvial Empire: A Study of State and Local Efforts Toward Land Development in the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi Valley, I (Washington, D.C., 1961), 38-40.

5. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle, 45.

6. Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 172.

7. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle, 4.

8. Henry Marie Brackenridge, Views of Louisiana: Together With A Journal of A Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811 (1814; rpt. Chicago, ?), 179.

9. Ibid., 179-180.

10. Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 55.

11. Brackenridge, Views of Louisiana, 176-177.

12. Ibid., 177, and Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 57.

13. Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 57.

14. Ibid., 64. See also Lafourche Parish Police Jury, Minutes, Book D 1852-1862 (1852-1862), 72. The minutes of the Police Jury can be found in the Clerk of Court's Office in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

15. Lafourche Parish Police Jury, Minutes, 72. See also Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 57.

16. Harrison, Alluvial Empire, 60-63.

17. Ibid., 89.

18. Jacqueline Voorhies, "The Search for the Promised Land," The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture, ed., Glenn Conrad (Lafayette, La., 1978), 108.

19. Philip Uzee, "Bayou Lafourche," The Rivers and Bayous of Louisiana, ed., Edwin H. Davis (Baton Rouge, 1968), 123.

20. Lafourche Parish Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, K (Thibodaux, Louisiana), 534.

21. United States Bureau of Census, Louisiana, 1810 (Washington, D.C., 1810), 121.

22. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, K, 534.

23. Voorhies, "The Search for the Promised Land," The Cajuns, 110.

24. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 25.

25. New Orleans Louisiana Courier, April 7, 1827 quoted in Sitterson, Sugar Country, 25.

26. Malcom Comeaux, "Louisiana's Acadians: The Environmental Impact," The Cajuns, 145-146.

27. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, K, 534.

28. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 47.

29. Comeaux, "Louisiana's Acadians," The Cajuns, 147.

30. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, I, 313.

31. Clerk of Court, "Joseph William Tucker Succession-Inventory," No. 230 (Thibodaux, Louisiana).

32. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, O, 461.

33. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, M, 117-118.

34. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, N, 313.

35. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, R, 252.

36. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, T, 321.

37. P. A. Champomier, Statement of the Sugar Crop Made in Louisiana, (New Orleans, 1849-1862).

38. Ibid.

39. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, T, 321.

40. Dr. W. C. Stubbs, "Origin and Evolution of the Sugar Industry of Louisiana," Standard History of New Orleans, Louisiana, ed., Henry Rightor (Chicago, 1900), 652-656.

41. Clerk of Court, "Expenses of Plantation of Estate of J.W. Tucker, -1852," No. 230.

42. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, I, 65. According to an entry dated January 5, 1852, Tucker brought 22 slaves into Louisiana on November 14, 1831. Aaron Register, from North Carolina, appeared before Judge George Seth Guion in Concordia Parish and declared that the following slaves were rightfully Tucker's: March, Phebe, Peter, Rebecca, Ben, Rachel, Hulia, Dick, Dinah, Duncan, Big George, Sarah, and child William, Little George, Many, Chloe, Ovid, Willie, Shadrach, Belinda, Grace and Jim.

43. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, R, 252-254 and Clerk of Court, "Joseph W. Tucker Succession-Inventory," No. 230.

44. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, AA, 390-394.

45. United States Bureau of Census, Louisiana, 1850.

46. Clerk of Court, "J.W. Tucker Estate-Plantation Inventory, 1863," No. 230.

47. Clerk of Court, "Abner Robinson Succession," No. 64 (Thibodaux, Louisiana). In 1841, Robinson bought the half-interest share owned by Thomas Barnard's wife and for two years was a partner with Tucker. See Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, R, 189.

48. Clerk of Court, "J.W. Tucker-1852 Inventory," No. 230.

49. Ibid.

50. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 79-80.

51. Clerk of Court, Book of Marriages, April 10, 1855.

52. Champomier, Statement of the Sugar Crop.

53. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 209-217.

54. Champomier, Statement of the Sugar Crop.

55. Clerk of Court, "J.W. Tucker Estate-Plantation Inventory, 1863," No. 230.

56. Clerk of Court, "J.W. Tucker Estate-Petition and Final Accounting-1872" No. 230.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.
59. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 14, 457.

60. Clerk of Court, "J.W. Tucker Estate-Petition and Final Accounting" No. 230.

61. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book. 14, 451-457. Knobloch paid $90,000 for the plantation and Tucker paid him $96,000. But in the sales to Hammond, Wormald, and Barker-Lepine, the selling price was $90,000.

62. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 15, 461-463.

63. Ibid., 701.

64. Louis and Alcee Bouchereau, Statement of the Sugar and Rice Crops made in Louisiana, 1874-1877, (New Orleans, 1874-1877).

65. Ibid., 1883-1889.

66. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 26, 443.

67. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 27, 43-49. Wormald had paid off his creditors by 1883 and received a clear title to the plantation. His troubles began in 1890 when over a period of months he borrowed $90,000, using a series of short-term notes, and then found he could not meet these obligations.

68. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 27, 43.

69. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 22, 248.

70. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 262.

71. "Barker-Lepine Diary-1908," J. Wilson Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University Archives (Thibodaux, Louisiana). The Nicholls State University has xeroxed copies of these diaries - the originals are in the possession of Mrs. J. Wilson Lepine.

72. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 264-266.

73. "Laurel Valley Production Charts, 1899-1926," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University Archives.

74. "Laurel Valley Production Chart, 1908," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

75. "Laurel Valley Profit and Loss Statements, 1901-1915," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

76. "Laurel Valley Production Chart, 1899-1925," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

77. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 357-360.

78. Ibid., 347.

79. Ibid., 345.

80. _____ to Morris Lecompte, president Whitney Bank, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 23, 1926, Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

81. Interview by author with Mrs. J. Wilson Lepine on August 1, 1978, in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

82. T. B. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana," Harper's New Monthly Magazine VIII (June-November, 1853), 746-747.

83. Sitterson, Sugar Country. 14, and interview by author with Dr. Robert Falgout, Sugar Cane Technologist, Nicholls State University on June 12, 1978.

84. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana," 754.

85. Benson, R.R., and A. C. Bell, Topographical Map: Laurel Valley Plantation, Parish of Lafourche, circa 1901, Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

86. "Laurel Valley Diaries, 1903-1914," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

87. "Laurel Valley Diary-1903," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

88. V. Alton Moody, Slavery of Louisiana Sugar Plantations (New Orleans, 1924), 43.

89. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region," 757-758.

90. Moody, Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations, 44-45.

91. Ibid.

92. Sitterson, Sugar Country, 271.

93. Ibid., 118-119.

94. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region," 760-761.

95. Interview by author with Jimmy Thibodaux on July 24, 1978 in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Mr. Thibodaux was born on Laurel Valley in 1906 and worked on the plantation until 1944.

96. "Laurel Valley Diaries, 1903-1914," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

97. Clerk of Court, "Expenses of Plantation of Estate of J.W. Tucker, 1852," No. 230.

98. Clerk of Court, "Joseph W. Tucker Succession - Employee Record Rolls, October-December, 1867," No. 230.

99. Clerk of Court, Lafourche Parish Conveyance Book, 14, 451.

100. Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office, "Tax Assessment Rolls-1881" (Library Annex, Thibodaux, Louisiana), 71.

101. "Laurel Valley Inventory-1922," Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

102. F.B. Noel to J.W. Lepine, October 15, 1923, Lepine Collection, Nicholls State University.

103. Interview with Jimmy Thibodaux.

Addendum To:
LAUREL VALLEY SUGAR PLANTATION
2 miles south of Thibodaux on
State Route 308
Thibodaux
Lafourche Parish
Louisiana

HAER No. LA-1

PHOTOGRAPHS

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